

A River Runs Through It



I've just had a taste of another side of Bintan – an off-the-beaten-track, alternative Bintan – and I like it a lot.

I sometimes think we undervalue the Indonesian island of Bintan just because it's so accessible, a mere 55 minutes by ferry from the terminal at Singapore's Tanah Merah. Nowhere that's so close and so easy to get to can be all that good, right? And when we do discover it, most of us get no farther than the relatively sanitised, security-gated Bintan Resorts area, where you find the Banyan Tree, the Angsana, Club Med, Nirwana and so on.

After 20 years on the island, Marc Thalmann clearly has a passion for what he calls "the real Bintan". A couple of years ago, he bought a lovely stretch of mangroves and beach on the east coast of the island, which he has sensitively developed into a rustic spa.

Marc picks me up at my resort hotel in his distinctive 1971 Holden to take me to his Aroma River Spa. As he explains, this model is still a popular choice of taxi here: spare parts are available and maintenance is comparatively cheap. And instead of air-conditioning, winding down the windows works just fine.

After driving south through secondary forest for a while, we turn east towards the coast. The road becomes narrower and we pass through umpteen

pretty villages and coconut groves, typical Southeast-Asian scenery. It's about an hour's drive to our destination, the neat village of Teluk Dalam – not much more than a mosque, a primary school and a couple of houses. The final stretch takes us past picturesque mangrove swamps and idyllic beaches.

by Verne Maree



Aroma River Spa is a rustic arrangement of *attap*-style reception and treatment rooms built atop a long stretch of boardwalk a couple of metres above the water. As you cross the doorstep, your senses are filled with a magical atmosphere that only pristine nature can conjure up; an ambience that no amount of five-star money can buy.

The sweet, friendly staff members are trained by Indra, who is also the reception officer at the spa. There is just one type of massage, appropriately Javanese. Lucky Marc exercises quality control by regularly undergoing massage by each of the masseuses; he believes it's important that they are all equally proficient and deliver a consistent experience.

Scrub and Rub

Once I've chosen my scrub (papaya enzyme), my massage oil (sandalwood) and indicated my preferred pressure level (strong), I'm led to my treatment room, this one designed for couples. Though open-sided and in the heart of the mangrove forest, it's immaculate. Hardly an ant dares cross the spotless floor.

After a relaxing but efficient scrub, I have the novel experience of 'showering' off the gunk by scooping up water in a wooden ladle from a tub, pouring it over myself and letting the water run through the cracks between the wooden floorboards. It takes a while, but does the trick. After all, Cleopatra never had a power shower, did she?


As strong, sure hands melt away my physical tension, the pure tranquillity of the place does the same for my mental stress. The sea murmurs gently and insects hum at a discreet distance. As the afternoon light fades, candles are lit; geckos step up their 'chk, chk, chk'; a plaintive voice calls from the village mosque; and then comes the rattle of a generator powering up downriver. It's all deeply peaceful and so satisfying. And the cost of this two-hour package? Just S\$59.

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The spa has an arrangement with a local taxi company that will pick you up and return you to your resort hotel – it makes a great half-day excursion and shows you something more of the island. They can even arrange a tailored day-trip from Singapore, including ferry, transfers, lunch and perhaps shopping and sightseeing. You can learn to make traditional baskets, explore the nearby Malay *kampung*, row your own sampan canoe through the mangroves – whatever takes your fancy. Now, *that's* something different to do with visitors. What's more, you'll be safe, well cared for and in exceptionally good hands.

Sleeping and Eating

If you don't mind really rustic accommodation – but with clean, fresh bed-linen from Ikea! – you can even stay for a night or longer. Mutiara Beach Guesthouse has three twin-sharing rooms (at a flat daily rate of \$35 per adult and \$25 per child, including three meals a day). The Pondok is a traditional *kampung* house that sleeps four; even more fun is the Kelong, a floating bungalow with a large sundeck. Be warned, though – there's no electricity and therefore no fans or air-conditioning: you sleep with open windows.

The kitchen is run by Ibu Rodiah, who, I'm told, is famed for her sambal, her tapioca- and coconut-based *kueh*, and especially her fisherman's basket lunch. Marc reckons she's come under the influence of globalization, and has even been known to whip up a batch of French-style crepes ... 

If you'd like to know more about the spa or its accommodation, visit www.mutiarabintan.com, email the charming Marc at thalmann@indosat.net.id, or call +62 770 692568.

